

# Subject centred learning enables effective tertiary teaching



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The measurement of quality in tertiary teaching is a contested concept and different definitions emerge in relation to shifting social, economic and political contexts and different stakeholders. We suggest that following the work of Parker Palmer (1998) quality tertiary teaching is effective when it places the subject at the centre of the teaching and learning experience. Through literature review and personal accounts arising from our own reflections as teachers, we explain the principles and benefits of subject-centred learning. We contrast this approach to student-centred learning which we argue too easily slips into "student-centred teaching" in which academics are held to ransom by multiple needs of students, many of whom will shy away from the inevitable pain associated with learning unless inspired to by the teacher. We suggest that disciplinary academics can find their ways through the maze of teaching and learning scholarship by listening for and to the voice of their subject as a guide to effective quality subject-centred learning. Whilst we acknowledge that teaching is necessarily highly personal and individual, we argue that it should not be focused primarily on either the needs of teachers or students. Rather learning needs are transformed through a disciplining to the higher needs of the subject.

*Keywords:* subject-centred learning, effective teaching, student-centred learning, reflection

## Introduction

Subject-centred learning, we believe, offers a useful approach for academics considering how best to tackle tertiary teaching in the most effective way. By putting the subject first and considering its fundamental nature or characteristics, we argue that a tertiary teacher can relatively easily and quickly determine the most effective way to teach their subject. Subject-centred learning is much more than the learning of a subject. For Palmer (1998, p117) the subject-centred classroom is characterised by the subject having a vivid and real presence such that it can hold both teachers and students alike in the thrall of learning about it.

Our aim is to outline the principles and thinking behind subject-centred learning within the context of the myriad pressures and challenges confronted by contemporary academics and in the face of alternative teaching and learning paradigms. The target audience for our ideas on subject-centred learning are academics from any field who do not normally engage in teaching and learning scholarship and whom perhaps are struggling with working out how to teach effectively. As Kandlbinder (in press 2012) points out, most university teachers appear to be wary of educational theory, so we attempt to provide a simple, clear and frank approach. We hope to be able to show such academics a promising pathway to set out on their own personal teaching odyssey. We also hope that teaching and learning scholars find our ideas constructive and helpful, notwithstanding that we acknowledge that much of what we espouse may differ from conventional advice on effective tertiary teaching.

Our argument is based upon a mixture of literature review and personal experience, thereby striving to emulate Kreber (2002, p11) who stated that 'the most effective teachers may likely be those who constantly reflect not only on their personal teaching experience but on the extent to which educational theory explains their experience'. To "walk the talk" we place our subject; i.e. teaching and learning at

the forefront of our attention and deliberation. Teaching is personal and we acknowledge the point made by Haggis (2009, p388) that in the 'world of education, "what we know" is contradictory and contested, and is understood to be rooted inextricably in value positions'. Thus our approach includes personal reflections and a reflexive approach which assumes that 'the beliefs of researchers affect the world that they research' (Fox et al. 2007, p182) and employs elements of autobiographical narrative (e.g. Campbell et al. 2004).

To put our subject in perspective we commence with a brief overview of some of the contemporary issues and challenges facing tertiary teachers as identified in recently published works including alternative teaching and learning paradigms. From the point of view of an academic seeking wisdom about effective teaching, we suggest these manifest as an overwhelming and confusing barrage of instructions, requirements or guidance. The majority of our paper, however, is devoted to explaining the concept of subject-based learning and our experiences with using this approach to our own teaching.

## **Teaching in difficult times**

There are numerous challenges confronting tertiary teachers and we do not attempt to outline them all here. We limit our discussion to two broad areas only relating to some key pressures within the tertiary sector and the broad range of interpretations and advice provided in the higher education literature for good or effective teaching.

### **Changes and challenges in the tertiary sector**

The changes and challenges in the tertiary sector over the past few decades have previously been well documented and discussed (e.g. Barnett, 1992, 2000, 2011). Here we briefly identify a cross-section of them. Firstly, there is a rapid expansion of higher education worldwide with governments desiring greater numbers of the populace to attain a university education making 'higher education ever more important to increasing numbers of people' (Barnett & Coate 2005, p1). This brings with it 'wider and more complex societal, political, economic, technological and demographic change forces' (Devlin & Samarawickrema 2010, p118) and requires teachers to accommodate a 'wider range of both learning styles and preferences and a wider range of language, cultural and educational backgrounds than has previously been the case' (p119).

The growth in the tertiary sector has been accompanied by significant institutional changes. In particular the 'corporatisation of universities' (Sawyer et al 2009) into 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter and Rhodes 2004) or the 'enterprise university' (Marginson & Considine 2000), with the application of 'neo-liberal policies' (Shumar 2004), and practices such as 'managerial accounting' (Rowland, 2008, p358). Under this approach new values define 'education as a product, the university as a firm, and the university system as an industry' (Sawyer et al 2009) with teachers as the 'deliverers' of curriculum' (Campbell et al 2004, p29). Rowland (2008, p353) states that 'policies designed for a market place' result in teaching that is '...increasingly directed towards measurable and therefore predictable outcomes' (p356) and essentially destroy collegiality and a love of knowledge which he argues underpins effective higher education. Similarly Lupton (in press 2012) argues that this culture pursues 'efficiency, standardisation, consistency and accountability' which emphasises 'teaching as a craft', rather than an art imbued with 'originality and risk taking'.

On a related note, Penuel (et al 2011, p331) suggests that an enduring goal of education research has been to 'identify programs that can reliably work in a wide variety of settings so that such programs can be scaled up to improve system-level outcomes' but they also note that such 'top down' approaches rarely work and that the '...teachers' adaptations of programs at the classroom level, not policy makers' plans, largely determine programs' effectiveness'. Lupton (in press 2012) provides examples of having the same programme taught at different campuses to student cohorts with different demographics being caught up in a policy of 'across campus consistency' such that exactly the same lecture slides are used at each campus. At a level of teaching above this, she notes the imposition by

her university of 'standardised templates for course outlines and assessment' that restrict the ability of individual teachers to customise their teaching. The danger with having standardised formats and templates for teaching is that "good teachers" may be construed as those that are 'good at getting kids to do what those rubrics ask' (Bryk et al 2012, p98).

There are also trends towards:

- admission of academically underprepared students (Wingate 2006; Devlin and O'Shea 2012);
- competition for funding and responding to the forces of globalisation (Shumar 2004);
- an emphasis on producing the employable, work-ready graduate (Cooper et al 2010) including dealing with the expectations of employers and issues surrounding accreditation and professional bodies (Devlin and Samarawickrema 2010);
- students spending more time in paid work to manage the cost of higher education (James et al 2007) and less time attending classes or engaged in other study and learning related activity;
- providing for 'flexible, "anytime-anywhere" education' (Devlin and Samarawickrema 2010, p119) which seems to result in no time at all remaining for teachers or students alike (Clegg, 2010);
- increased use of computer based technologies (Savin-Baden 2010, Lupton 2012) meaning that teachers must continually learn new skills, technologies and ways of interacting and communicating with students (Devlin and Samarawickrema 2010);
- large amounts of teaching load being carried by casual staff who are only marginally linked to the institution and to students and whom are becoming increasingly disenfranchised with their uncertain career prospects (Evans 2012, Rea 2012); and
- extended surveillance on academics as teachers in terms of quality control, transparency and accountability (Lupton in press 2012).

We could go on of course, but our key point is that these multiple considerations all impact on a tertiary teacher trying to work out the best way to approach teaching.

Finally, the nature of the teaching and learning sector is itself complex. For example, Kandlbinder (in press 2012) notes that the field of higher education research has developed as 'an eclectic mix of theories and concepts' along with an excessive amount of jargon and those new to the field would need to read widely in order to 'come to grips with the field'. Perhaps more significantly though, Kandlbinder (in press 2012) argues that even were the field easy to understand, 'many early career university lecturers perceive these concepts yet do not see how theory provides models that help answer the questions thrown up by practice'. In the next section we identify some of the different conceptualisations of effective teaching which tertiary teachers who aspire to improve their own teaching practices might encounter and in particular a possible confusion between student-centred learning and student-centred teaching.

### **Effective teaching: student-centred learning or student-centred teaching?**

The constructivist model of learning assumes each learner constructs their understanding through active engagement with the subject. This assumption underlines student-centred learning which places the needs and interests of the learner at the centre of inquiry (Brown 2008). Students follow their natural curiosity and thus become engaged with the subject. The role of the teacher is to scaffold students' ability to learn; to encourage each student to reflect on their own learning process to develop a high level of learning competency; and to design active learning experiences that deepen students' understanding of the subject. In this model the teacher is in a partnership of learning with the student and their main responsibility is to facilitate students' learning processes. As Brown (2008, p30) notes: 'Put simply, student-centered instruction is when the planning, teaching, and assessment revolve around the needs and abilities of the students'. Currently, most of the skills and practices that are considered essential to be an effective tertiary teacher revolve around creating this form of student experience. For example, Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010, p112) state that: 'Effective teaching has been broadly understood as teaching that is oriented to and focused on students and their learning'.

This is reflected in the criteria for awarding a citation for 'outstanding contributions to student learning' by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (2012, pp. 6-7) with three of the five criteria being oriented to the student experience created by the teacher as follows:

- Approaches to the support of learning and teaching that influence, motivate and inspire students to learn
- Approaches to assessment, feedback and learning support that foster independent learning
- Respect and support for the development of students as individuals.

With respect to determining what an effective university teacher meant for students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, Devlin and O'Shea (2012, p385) state that the most helpful factors include: 'teacher availability to help, their enthusiasm and dedication; and their effective communication with students particularly but not exclusively around assessment requirements'. Bryk (et al 2012, p. 90) suggest that: 'what are most predictive of excellent teaching are personal traits and dispositions rather than specific prior knowledge or specific prior experiences'. Researching a student perspective of effective teaching, Young and Shaw (1999, p. 682) report that: 'effective communication, a comfortable learning atmosphere, concern for student learning, student motivation, and course organization were found to be highly related, as a group, to the criterion measure of teacher effectiveness'. They also report that: 'To be rated as effective, a teacher had to be rated very high on genuine respect for students, concern for student learning, and value of the course' (p.683); these were found to be essential components for a very effective teacher, with other important variables not necessarily being rated high.

A number of confusions can occur, however, when discipline trained academics consider the question of "how to be an effective teacher?" within a student-centred learning paradigm. These confusions may lead to the trap of what we call developing "teacher-centred students" or "student-centred teaching" [1]. First, there is concern that without an extended understanding of the complexity of developmental learning theory and concepts such as Vygotsky's (1978) *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) disciplinary teachers may over scaffold learning experiences. As Reiser (2004, p274) points out 'scaffolding entails a delicate negotiation between providing support and continuing to engage learners actively in the process'. We suggest that discipline trained academics may confuse general needs of students as people with students' learning needs. When the focus is on the general needs of the students, teachers may become embroiled in concerns that they are not meeting these needs; for example, not answering emails quickly enough, not posting sufficient tips and hints onto learning management system (LMS) websites, not sufficiently designing handouts for easy comprehension by students etc. The worst form of this student centred-teaching is when time poor academics endlessly "run after" students' demands to be fed "just-in-time" information. This is not what was intended by student-centred learning but given that many academics are concerned to gain high teaching evaluations from their students (to meet probationary/promotion benchmarks) it can become a trap (Johnson 2000).

Secondly, student-centred teaching becomes embroiled in attempting to meet the diversity of students' learning needs. Students have different learning styles (e.g. visual, auditory) and also different learning levels (e.g. academically underprepared, English as a second language). Constructivist learning theory demands that tertiary teachers prepare materials with a variety of delivery techniques and multiple different activities to cater for diverse learning needs. Whilst this is important we suggest that as the teacher of the subject the academic should address the *needs of the subject* not only the needs of the student, in order to make an effective pedagogical decision. However, in a standardized outcome driven learning environment, (e.g. the managerial model of a university discussed previously), it is assumed that all disciplinary subjects have the same needs.

In student-centred teaching the focus has shifted from the learning to the needs of the student. It is as if the academic in their role as facilitator of learning must address and assist students with all of the difficulties that distract and distance them from their learning processes. This role of student support can take time and space away from the academic's role of teacher of a subject. Given the size of

classes this can mean that large amounts of an academic's time is taken up with addressing individual students' needs. The complexity of this task is underlined by 'evidence that university students' mental health is worse than other sections of the population' (Storrie et al. 2012, p89) and yet Clegg and Rowland (2010, p724) caution academics who wish to be overly "kind" to their students that they then risk 'avoiding responsibility for the student's confrontation with the inevitable pain of learning'. Again, this is a delicate negotiation between sufficient support for students and too much accommodation to learners' demands. Part of the difficulty here is that whilst there is a focus on relationships in student-centred learning (collaborative learning; teachers as always available; teachers as primarily facilitators) there is often very little explicit discussion as to the boundaries and qualities of learning relationships at the undergraduate level. There has been substantial research into the key role the relationship between supervisor and doctoral candidates plays in successful outcomes and a recognition of the emotional complexities that can occur (e.g. Grant 1999, 2005). Just as research students project unconscious desires and anxieties onto supervisors so do undergraduates project emotions onto their teachers. As Palmer and Zajonc (2010, p41) put it: 'Wherever two or three are gathered feelings will be generated - and those feelings will work for or against the aims of education'. Explicitly modeling for students a relationship of reflective critical thinking and listening with the disciplinary subject teachers may avoid the "dark side" of the student-centred learning model (which we have named as "student-centred teaching") and instead focus on subject-centred teaching.

## **Subject-centred teaching**

Various recent higher education writers have hinted at or alluded to the importance of subject in higher education. In what we interpret as a cautioning of teaching and learning staff, Wingate (2006, p457) states that 'learning how to study effectively at university cannot be separated from subject content'. Much advice, however, and prescription about teaching provided to academics (e.g. learning management systems, unit templates, performance measures etc) is divorced from the subject taught by an individual academic. It is interesting to note that one of the criteria for effective teaching utilised by Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (2012, pp6-7) concerns the: 'Development of curricula, resources and services that reflect a command of the field'. Barnett and Coate (2005) and Clegg (2010, p359) highlight the importance of curriculum, suggesting that it has been a missing concept in much higher education literature. The idea that an effective teacher must know their subject well is frequently noted in the literature: for example Kreber (2002, p9) state that effective teaching 'requires sound knowledge of one's discipline'; while Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010, p112) refer to the 'critical element of disciplinary knowledge' as one aspect of teaching excellence. We support this notion too, but reiterate that subject-centred learning is not the same as simply knowing or learning of a subject.

Subject-centred teaching essentially brings teacher and student together around a common disciplinary interest. Rowland (2008, p355), for example, states: 'The idea of academics loving their subject but not wanting to share it with others is incongruous', while Palmer (1999, p25) suggests that the subject chooses the teacher in the first place:

Many of us were called to teach by encountering not only a mentor but also a particular field of study. We were drawn to a body of knowledge because it shed light on our identity as well as on the world. We did not merely find a subject to teach – the subject also found us.

The same thinking could be extended to students; presumably their choice of degrees and of specific units is guided in large part by the subject on offer. The major finding of Young and Shaw (1999, p683) that: 'the worth of a course for the university students was the most important predictor of teacher effectiveness' seems to us to imply this.

Putting the subject first unites teacher and student in a shared quest. In the words of Palmer (1999, p116) subject-centred learning creates: 'a classroom in which teacher and students alike are focused on a great thing' and further on: 'The subject-centred classroom is characterised by the fact that the third thing has a presence so real, so vivid, so vocal, that it can hold teacher and students alike accountable

for what they say and do' (p117). As Ashworth (2004, p254) notes: 'learning is more than a matter of cognition'. Rowland (2008) suggests that intellectual love can be seen to underlie both the relationship between learner and subject matter and like wise between the teacher and the subject. This shared intellectual love can become the basis of a conversation in which 'learning is best considered participatory' (Ashworth 2004, p147), where 'the learner is primarily an inquirer' (p147) and it acknowledges the 'common cause' (p154) shared by the learner and teacher. As Bryk (et al 2010, p88) puts it, teachers are in a 'joint social enterprise' which extends beyond the teacher-student dynamic to include the wider community of teachers too.

The notion of an effective teacher in subject-centred teaching is one who inspires and enables their students to engage with the subject. For example, Ballantyne (et al 1999, p244) found: 'imparting a love of and enthusiasm for a subject' to be characteristic of good teaching as perceived by academics surveyed and interviewed on this topic. In the words of Barnett and Coate (2005, p3):

... we suggest that curriculum design has too readily been understood as tasks of filling of various kinds (filling spaces, time and modules, not to mention minds). Instead, we propose that curriculum design should be understood as the imaginative *design of spaces as such*, spaces that are likely to generate new energies among students and inspire them, and so prompt their *triple engagement* – in knowing, acting and being.

Similarly, Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010, p112) state that excellent teachers: 'know how to motivate their students, how to convey concepts and how to help students overcome difficulties in their learning'. Ashworth (2004, p155) describes excellent teaching in terms of 'hermeneutic participation' in which individual learners see themselves 'as having the right to interact with the subject matter' (p155), and where the learner is an 'interpreter making sense of the material which is being proffered' (p157). Thus, the centrality of the subject to an effective learning environment is clear. We return to the work of Palmer (1999, p118) to illustrate this in his own words:

In a subject-centred classroom, the teacher's central task is to give the great thing an independent voice—a capacity to speak its truth quite apart from the teacher's voice in terms that students can hear and understand. When the great thing speaks for itself, teachers and students are more likely to come into a genuine learning community, a community that does not collapse into the egos of students or teachers but knows itself accountable to the subject at its core.

Kreber (2002, p9) takes the scope of consideration even further suggesting that excellent teaching requires a 'good understanding of how to help students grow within, and perhaps even beyond, the discipline'; a kind of transcendence of any particular subject. We suggest that what lies at the heart of subject-centred teaching and learning is the sense of the subject as a 'great thing' (Palmer 1999, p118), and irrespective of the starting subject, or specialist academic field, the pursuit of learning in this way leads students into a more a fundamental exploration of the wider world. It is not simply a quirk of history that the highest degree offered by a university is a Doctor of Philosophy. To philosophise is to engage in understanding the meaning of life. This is what we have in mind when thinking about effective teaching and learning. This is teaching as art (Lupton in press 2012) and it sits far above the mechanistic and managerial conceptualisations of teaching we discussed previously with respect to the continuum of teaching and learning.

### **Subject-centred learning from our experience**

Previously we noted the concerns of Lupton (in press 2012) with respect to the increasing standardisation of teaching in universities and its impact on teachers. Notwithstanding the acknowledged benefits of 'providing consistency, accountability and transparency' (p7) she argues that 'taken in their most extreme form, they strip the teacher of freedom in favour of generic structures that provide a lowest common denominator, teacher-proof experience for both teachers and students' (p7). Further on she argues that: 'A teacher-proof approach is also student-proof. In other words, the teacher and the student are both absent, as they have no impact on structures' (Lupton 2012, p8). Having experienced some of these constraints and difficulties in our own teaching we found it extremely

useful to articulate our concerns around student-centred teaching. Our own reflections on this concept are provided in Boxes 1 and 2.

### **Box 1: Discovering subject-centred learning as a concept [Angus]**

In early 2012 when I read Palmer (1999) for the first time I experienced a "Eureka moment". Here was a terminology and a teaching philosophy, subject-centred learning, that described the approach I had been using in the classroom for the past two decades. Without having a name for it and without consciously realising it, I had always put my subject first. I have always resonated with the old adage, "If you want to learn something, teach it" because prior to almost any class I would research the latest thinking or advances in the topic at hand. I have always felt that my teaching is best when I am "fresh" with respect to my knowledge of the subject.

### **Box 2: Subject-centred learning [Julia]**

My subject is learning and teaching at university, and my method is listening. I place the subject of learning at the centre of my being with students by listening. Students never cease. Just as T.S. Eliot exhorted to never cease from exploration and to know that place for the first time; so with teaching the waves of students never cease to crash against the shores of my desk, and I know that it is only when I cease from too much activity that I will know this place of learning again for that first time. So, I sit with a student who is beginning on their learning journey and I too ( hopefully) again, with opening and wonderous eyes, see what it is like to engage with learning. The joy of teaching is the love that I hold for the learning journey; the focus is always on the learning (rather than the student) so it is together that we explore and journey (as a journey woman working at the art of teaching, not yet a master but past the stage of being an apprentice, I watch and build and tighten and loosen with the student as they engage with learning).

Teaching and research go hand in hand for an academic engaged in subject-centred teaching (see Box 3 for a personal account). This is another key reason for resisting the trend noted previously for increasing use of casual teaching staff. As Rowland (2008) noted, a love of knowledge is core to university.

### **Box 3: Teaching and research complements subject-centred learning [Angus]**

A genuine passion for my subject sustains my academic life and it is interwoven in all of my teaching, research and community based activities (such as training courses) alike because I teach in my area of research speciality. It means that my teaching complements my academic research and vice versa. For example, through research I develop new ideas and knowledge in my field as well as staying up to date with the work of other researchers, all of which I share with my students when I am teaching. Sometimes I work the other way around, however, so that an idea that might have arisen in a classroom or which I have "experimented with" through sharing it with my students might become a focus for research activity. A more immediate interaction still is the direct sharing of presentation slides used in teaching, conference presentations and/or training courses I run for professionals in my field.

Perhaps the seemingly perennial problem of large numbers of students taking only a surface approach to learning (e.g. Haggis 2009) would be lessened with a subject-centred approach to teaching and learning. Allowing the subject to cast its spell on the students seems to us the approach most likely to entice students into deep learning (Box 4 provides a personal perspective of universities as places of deep learning). The depth of learning that the subject may call forth might move the list of generic graduate attributes, that almost all universities now claim as learning outcomes or skills from a degree, to being measured against the 'quality of the development of students' minds' (Barnett 1992,p8).

When we advocate putting the subject first and foremost in our approach to teaching, allowing "intellectual love" (i.e. the love of knowledge, Rowland 2008) to prevail we start by contemplating the nature of our subject and posing the question: What is the best way to teach this? For us, this is far more valuable than starting with pressures such as making online teaching platforms central to the

#### **Box 4: Universities as places of deep learning [Julia]**

Universities change. Yet, some aspects of teaching and learning never change and what has remained constant, for me, is my belief and commitment to ideas, words, meaning and a core belief that the idea of higher education is the work of holding and growing the life of the mind. That in this subject of higher education there is a core gift that we can all receive, the gift of waking up!

design and execution of a unit of study. The subject clearly communicates to us what is needed (see Box 5), and we can imagine this being the case for any academic. For example, it makes sense that a veterinary science student must spend considerable time handling animals, a chemist in the laboratory, students of literature immersed in the great novels or reading aloud/acting out theatrical works, environmental scientists out in the field and so on. We suggest that force-fitting teaching into a university's business or technology paradigms will at best be only second best.

#### **Box 5: Example of subject-centred approach to learning: The world café [Angus]**

One unit I teach, with an enrolment of around 60 students, focuses on government policy and decision-making. A major topic within this broad subject addresses public participation principles and techniques and one specific technique I teach is the world café. Taking a subject-centred approach to thinking about how best to teach this, the most obvious answer for me was to actually run a world café; i.e. to walk the talk or teach through immersion by being the subject itself. To do this I needed to have the whole class together in a workshop room for a period of several hours. This immediately eliminated the normal teaching approach adopted by my university of 2-3 individual one hour lectures and a separate one hour tutorial per week for up to 15 students at a time. There was also limited value for lecturing or use of the learning management system beyond providing some background and readings about how a world café is run.

A world café has a formal structure based around small table discussions focused on the some key questions, including some processes for forming and shifting group membership and recording the gist of the discussions (the name of the technique reflects the notion of capturing the type of conversation friends and colleagues might have over coffee). For my world café I based it around questions concerning challenges in decision-making including involvement of the public so that the activity not only modelled one technique but had the students exploring the broader subject itself in some depth. They reported afterwards that they found it to be a great learning experience (e.g. compared to a traditional tutorial or small group activity approach). It was a also a valuable learning experience for me, because the students behaved differently to how community groups and people drawn from the general public for world café events that I had previously experienced outside of the university setting. Thus the subject guided the teaching of the class and it became a valuable learning experience for my students and myself alike. The result was a class that differed considerably (e.g. room selection, timetabling, format etc) from the "standard model" employed at my university. Letting the subject "speak" to me, enabled an effective teaching and learning experience to emerge.

The emphasis by universities on staying at the leading edge of teaching technologies appears to be primarily market driven. Competition for student numbers and for offshore, international students in particular forces universities to continually re-invent their "brand" and offer the latest to the consumer/client. It may be that the latest is the best, however, questions concerning quality are always contextual and the emphasis on updating and changing teaching technology should be within the context of the subject not the context of the technology of teaching (Box 6).

Humans are foragers for knowledge and in that foraging people are attracted to the new because it is new, not because it is necessarily better than the previous model. This is true for academics who may want to explore and follow the latest brightest and shiniest new theory/ toy/ concept/ technology /app/ etc. Academics usually enjoy learning but when too much time is spent using new technology they are at Bateson's (1973) level 0 learning of pushing buttons to see what happens rather than at level 2 learning which asks, "how should I teach this content in this context with these students?" Teaching



technologies and other forms of standardisation (e.g. unit templates) seemingly increasingly being demanded by universities push practice "downward" to the lowest common denominator; they are ultimately actually about the transmission of learning materials rather than directly enabling learning.

#### **Box 6: Reflections on subject-centred learning and teaching technologies [Angus]**

I eagerly took up technological advances for teaching as they emerged such as having supporting webpages, recording lectures for pod-casts and using *PowerPoint*. Each technological advance brought with it a learning curve and a big time investment to learn how to operate them effectively. I am now resisting pressures from teaching and learning staff to diversify the teaching platforms I use through addition of social media and other online teaching tools because of the time investment required to learn how to use them effectively coupled with a big dose of scepticism as to their teaching and learning value. Fundamentally it would mean that my attention be diverted away from my subject onto teaching technologies. Also the pressure to employ new technologies seems to be simply because they are available or that they suit the university's agenda. I place my subject first. How I teach my subject should be appropriate to that subject and not to technology as the first consideration.

In our own quest to be effective teachers, we are aiming to create a setting in which personal transformation occurs within our students. In our experience this occurs when the subject (Palmer's 1999, p116 'great thing') "speaks" to the student.

## **Conclusion**

We have argued that subject-centred learning offers a relatively easy and effective approach that academics can utilise to guide the development of their teaching effort. Ultimately the potential transformative experience of higher education is based on students transcending what they are taught and moving into a sense of control over their learning relationship with the subject. Effective tertiary teaching models appropriate learning relationships with the subject and in doing this gives space and time to the subject. We freely acknowledge that taking a subject-centred approach to tertiary teaching not only flies in the face of much conventional guidance on how to teach effectively, but may also bring the academic up against the preferred approach strongly advocated by universities increasingly operating with a standardised and business-like approach. However, we argue that in the long-term interests of the academy (the university, tertiary teachers and students alike), effective teaching and learning, not technological and other managerial interests, must come first. To do this we advocate adopting a subject-centred approach; an approach that enables teachers and students to enter into a profound relationship with their chosen subject or discipline. There is an element of unpredictability in any relationship. For students to have the courage to be open to this level of learning, teachers must be brave.

## **Endnote**

- [1] The literature tends to use student-centred learning and student-centred teaching as interchangeable, whilst we are making a clear distinction between the two.

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